

An Investigation into Psychological Well-being Levels of Higher Education Students with Respect to Personality Traits and Self-compassion*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the correlation between psychological well-being, personal traits and self-compassion levels, and to find out whether personal traits and self-compassion level significantly predict psychological well-being. The study sample is composed of 232 (36.5%) students from Education Faculty of Selçuk University, 195 (30.7%) students from Cumhuriyet University, 209 (32.9%) students from Ahi Evran University. There were totally 636 randomly selected students in the study group, 405 of them (%67.5) being females and 231 of them (32.5%) being males. The data were collected using Psychological Well-being Scale, Adjective Based Personality Scale, Self-compassion Scale and personal information form. To analyze the data, Pearson conduct moment correlations, and stepwise regression analysis technique were used. It was seen that there was a significant positive correlation between all subscales of psychological well-being and self-compassion. There was a negative correlation between psychological well-being and neuroticism and a positive correlation between psychological well-being and other personality traits, whereas no significant correlation was found between autonomy and agreeableness. Personal traits and self-compassion significantly predict all subscales of psychological well-being. It was found that the most significant predictor of positive relations with others as a subscale of psychological well-being is extroversion; that the most prominent predictor of autonomy, environmental mastery, and purpose in life and self-acceptance subscales is self-compassion, and that the variable which predicts the subscale of personal growth best is openness to experience as personal traits.

Key Words

Five-factor Personality Theory, Personal Traits, Psychological Well-being, Self-compassion.

In recent years, psychologists have focused on positive sides of people rather than their problems. The purpose of positive psychology is to initiate a change that concentrates on equipping people with positive qualities rather than struggling to

change bad aspects of life. One of the concepts of this approach is psychological well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Ryff (1995) suggests that well-being should be defined with respect to positive properties. Psychological well-being means

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more than being free from stress, and not having other psychological problems. It encompasses positive self-perception, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, autonomy, purpose in life and emotions inclined towards a healthy development (Ryff, 1995). In order to account for well-being, two different perspectives are seen in the literature. The first is the concept of hedonism, and the other is psychological functionality (eudaimonic) (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The hedonist perspective defines well-being as satisfaction and happiness. The main criterion for the conceptualization of the hedonist perspective is a person's evaluating his/her life according to a set of values and standards that he/she determine. The perspective of psychological functionality defines well-being based on self-realization and full functionality (Waterman, 1993). Schmutte and Ryff (1997) argue that though typical measurements that stress positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction as three components of psychological well-being are effective in measuring well-being, they are conceptually not appropriate for psychological health development. According to Ryff (1989a), structures that underlie well-being basically has a more complicated structure than that commonly seen in the literature. Ryff (1989a) also states that psychological well-being is a multidimensional structure rather than a mere combination of positive and negative affect and life satisfaction.

The positive psychological function has six different dimensions. These dimensions include positive assessment of an individual's life and personal history (self-acceptance), the feeling of continuous growth and development as an individual (personal growth), the individual's belief that life is meaningful and purposeful (purpose in life), establishing quality relations with other individuals (positive relations with others), the ability of the individual to direct his/her life and the world around him/her (environmental mastery), making individual decisions (autonomy) (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) Positive Relations with Others: Ryff (1989a) defined positive relations as "strong emotions of empathy and love established with others in a clear and reliable way".

Autonomy: Christopher (1999) notes that Ryff considers autonomy as equal to making one's own decisions, freedom, internal locus of control, individualization and self-regulation of behaviour.

Environmental Mastery: Ryff (1989a) defines environmental mastery as "the ability of the individual to create or select an environment

that is compatible with his/her personal and psychological conditions". *Personal Development:* Ryff (1989a) defines personal development as "the ability of the individual to develop his/her available potential to develop and grow as he/she is". Personal development is the ability to continue progress on a personal basis. *Purpose in Life:* According to Ryff, the purpose in life involves the feeling of direction and purposefulness in life. It is thought that purpose in life is closely connected with individualism and freedom. *Self-acceptance:* Ryff (1989a) defines self-acceptance, a significant property of positive psychological functionality, as having a positive attitude towards oneself. Self-acceptance means a positive attitude towards oneself.

Personality is the characteristic and distinctive properties of behaviours that shape a person's physical and social environment (Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith, Bem, & Hoeksema, 1999). It is one of the most comprehensive concepts in psychology. Any characteristic property that belongs to and describes a person helps us get acquainted with and understand that particular person. In this respect, personality is a term that includes an individual's interests, attitudes, and abilities, speaking style, outer appearance and his/her style of adopting into the environment (Burger, 1993). Accounting for personality through five dimensions began in the 1960s, and it accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s. Towards the end of the 1980s, personality psychologists agreed upon the five strong factors of the Five-Factor Model that was able to provide a meaningful and practical taxonomy in order to reorganize the complicated findings in the literature on personality (Taggar, Hackett, & Saha, 1999). A large portion of the research studies agree that most of the personality approaches that focus on common properties of personality might be included in the five factors. They called this five-dimension approach as "Big Five" (Friedman & Schustack, 1999). The Five-factor Personality Model is a hierarchical organization of personal properties, and it has five sub-dimensions. Five factors' names are extroversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience (McCrae & John, 1992). The five-factor personality model emerged as a result of an extensive analysis of various personality tests, scales and the adjectives that are used to describe personality (Friedman & Schustack, 1999). Extroverts are defined as positive, social, energetic, joyful, and they are interested in others, whereas introverts are reserved and aloof people who like to be alone (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Neurotic individuals tend

to experience prolonged negative feelings and develop various behavioural pathologies. They have difficulty in establishing and maintaining relations with others. They experience stress for extended periods of time (Bruck & Allen, 2003). Emotionally stable individuals, on the other hand, are quiet and they are content with themselves (Friedman & Schustack, 1999); they are agreeable and highly self-confident. In addition, they tend to experience positive emotions (McCrae & John, 1992). Agreeable people are friendly, cooperative, reliable and warm. They are individuals who are humble, supportive, flexible, and they establish emotional bonds with others (McCrae & John, 1992). Highly agreeable people are defined as reliable, easy-going, frank, altruistic and modest individuals (Judge et al., 2002). Responsibility as a personality trait signifies a personality dimension that involves such properties as obedience, orderliness, self-discipline and being achievement-oriented. People with a strong sense of responsibility are disciplined and careful, and they possess a strong sense of achievement, while those with a weak sense of responsibility are considered to be careless, messy and lazy people (Costa & McCrae, 1992). We think that this dimension is linked with such properties as having powerful imagination, being knowledgeable, having curiosity for learning; being original, straightforward, quick-witted and having the sensitivity of an artist (Barrick & Mount, 1991). The individuals who have the quality of openness to experience are considered to be imaginative, adventurous, original, creative, curious, while it is thought that those individuals who are slightly open to experience resist change, and they are closed and conservative people.

Individuals experience such feelings as grief, worry, burnout, and failure in certain periods of their lives. In order for them to be able to cope with negative emotions, it is essential that they feel relaxed and most importantly get rid of such negative feelings without giving harm to themselves. To help individuals get rid of these feelings and make their life worthier of living and compassionate, their self-compassion should be developed. It is sympathy that forms the content of self-compassion. This is because compassion involves being sensitive to others' suffering, being aware of others' grief, not disregarding or avoiding these sufferings and grief, being affectionate towards others, the desire to alleviate others' sufferings that are apparent and understanding people who fail or do wrong without judging them (Deniz, Kesici, & Sümer, 2008). Self-compassion is defined as one's behaving sensitively

and in an understanding way rather than criticizing oneself in the case of suffering and failure, seeing negative experiences as a part of human life and looking for logical solutions instead of emphasizing negative emotions and thoughts (Neff, 2003a as cited in Deniz & Sümer, 2010). When we encounter a situation that causes grief or negative feelings, three dimensions of self-compassion, emerge.

a) Kindness: involves a person's being understanding towards himself/herself rather than being critical. People who have kindness, don't make harsh judgment and self-criticism towards himself/herself (Neff, 2003a).

b) Common humanity: The individual's viewing his/her experiences as shared experiences of all people.

c) Mindfulness: Balancing negative feelings by avoiding extreme identification (Dilmaç, Deniz, & Deniz, 2010). Mindfulness is a balanced awareness of one's emotions, thoughts without avoiding or trying to change them and without exaggeration or prejudice (Akin, 2009).

When the literature is reviewed, it is seen that there are only a handful of studies on psychological well-being. The concept was introduced into the literature in Turkish by Cenkseven (2004), who investigated the predictors of psychological well-being. Tanhan (2007) studied the effects of death education on psychological well-being. Gürel (2009) studied the impact of thinking styles on psychological well-being.

Method

This study was carried out as a relational screening model. The dependent variable in the study was psychological well-being, and the independent variables were personal characteristics and self-compassion level. The population of the study was composed of higher education students. The study sample was selected through random sampling. Totally 636 students took part in the study, 232 (%36.5) being in Selçuk University, 209 (%32.9) of them being at Ahi Evran University, and 195 (%30.7) of them being at Cumhuriyet University. 405 of the participants were females (67.5%), while 231 of them (32.5%) were males.

Instruments

Psychological Well-Being Scale: the scale is composed of 84 items. The Psychological Well-being Scale is composed of 6 factors with 14

items used to measure the dimensions of positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental control, personal growth, purpose in life and self-acceptance. The participants were asked to respond to seven-point likert scale items with the labels “I strongly disagree” and “I strongly agree”. After the reversely scored items were coded, the scores of 14 items for each subscale were summed. Higher scores for a particular subscale mean that the value of that subscale is high. The scale was adapted into Turkish by Cenkseven (2004). The total internal reliability coefficient of the psychological well-being scale was found to be .93. It was found that the test-retest reliability coefficient for the total scores was .84. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the Psychological Well-being Scale was found to be .88.

Adjective Based Personality Scale: This tool is a scale developed by Bacanlı, İlhan, and Arslan (2009). The scale is composed of 40 adjective pairs that are compatible with the concept of personality suggested by the Five-Factor Personality Theory. It is designed in the form of seven-point Likert items and is composed of 5 dimensions; that is, neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and responsibility. Higher scores in a subscale mean that the personal characteristic in that subscale is dominant. It is seen that the internal reliability coefficients of the dimensions of Adjective Based Personality Scale (ABPT) range between .73 and .89. Based on the results of results of the factor analysis carried out to test the validity of the ABPT, 40 out of 50 pairs of adjectives were identified, and the results revealed that the five dimensions explained 52.6% of the variance in the ABPT (Bacanlı et al., 2009).

Self-Compassion Scale The Self-compassion Scale, developed by Neff (2003b), was validated and adapted into Turkish by Deniz et al. (2008). In the original scale, which was prepared to measure the properties of self-compassion, the respondents are asked to rate how often they acted about a given situation by using five-point Likert scale with labels ranging from “Almost never=1” to “Almost always=5”. Higher scores in the scale indicate higher levels of self-compassion. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient calculated in line with analysis of the scale was found to be .89. In addition, internal reliability coefficient on the scale was found to be .89, and test retest reliability coefficient was calculated to be .83 (Deniz et al., 2008).

Data Analysis

The data collected through the scales were analyzed using SPSS 17.0. To analyze the data, Pearson conduct moments coefficient and stepwise regression analysis were used.

Results

It was found that each subscale of psychological well-being was positively correlated with self-compassion. Self-compassion and self-acceptance are the most conspicuous subscales of psychological well-being. It is seen that all subscales of psychological well-being are significantly correlated with all subscales of personality. It was found that positive relations with others strongly correlated with property of extroversion in the subscale of environmental mastery and self-acceptance, the property of openness to experience in the subscale of autonomy and personal growth and the property of responsibility in the subscale of purpose in life.

Regression analysis carried out to determine the predictors of positive relations with others revealed that personal characteristics and self-compassion explained 34% of the variance. Extroversion, self-compassion and neuroticism were found be the predictors of the dimension of positive relations with others.

In the results for the subscale of autonomy revealed that self-compassion and openness to experience were significant positive predictors, while agreeableness was a negative predictor, and these explained the 17% of the variance.

It was also found that in terms of the subscale of environmental mastery, self-compassion, responsibility, extroversion and neuroticism as subscales were predictive variables and they explained 49% of the variance in the subscale.

The analysis carried to test whether psychological well-being predicts the subscale of personal development revealed that openness to experience, self-compassion and neuroticism were predictive variables. Openness to experience and self-compassion predict psychological well-being in a positive way, while neuroticism predicts it in a negative way. These variables explain 32% of the total variance.

The regression analysis carried out to find out the predictive power of purpose in life indicated that self-compassion and personality traits predicted 33% of the variance in the subscale. Self-compassion, responsibility and neuroticism were

found to be significant predictors of the subscale of life purpose.

Self-compassion, together with personal characteristics, accounts for 44% of the variance in self-acceptance. Self-compassion and extroversion were positive predictors; while neuroticism was negative a negative predictor in the self-acceptance subscale of psychological well-being.

Discussions

In the present study, it was found that there was a significant positive correlation between all subscales of psychological well-being and self-compassion. Self-compassion and self-acceptance are the most conspicuous subscales of psychological well-being. Self-acceptance implies that the individual has a positive attitude towards himself/herself. It involves adopting a positive attitude towards oneself, accepting both the positive and negative sides of the self and having positive emotions about past experiences. Self-compassion involves being open to one's suffering rather than avoiding it, identifying oneself with that suffering, the desire to alleviate that suffering and showing affection and the most importantly, understanding one's own grief, deficiencies and failures without judging them as a part of gaining new experiences. In this regard, it is seen that the basic ideas of self-compassion and psychological well-being are similar to each other. The relations between them lend support to this. It was found that there was a significant correlation between all subscales of psychological well-being and personal characteristics. It was found that there was a strong significant correlation between the subscales of environmental mastery and self-acceptance and extroversion; between the subscales of autonomy and personal development and openness to experience to experiences and between the subscale of purpose in life and responsibility. When the literature is examined, it is seen that there was a significant correlation between the subscales in the studies that focused on the relationship between the Five Factor Personality Theory and psychological well-being (Schmutte & Ryff, 1997; Grant, Langan-Fox, & Anglim 2009). Schmutte and Ryff (1997) found that there was a significant positive correlation between personal growth, openness to experience to new experiences and extroversion; between positive relations with others and agreeableness and extroversion and between environmental mastery, purpose in life and responsibility. In Grant et al. (2009) study, extroversion, neuroticism and responsibility were

found to be the predictors of both subjective and psychological well-being. When the findings of the present study and those in the literature are compared, it is seen that these findings are parallel, although there are some differences in an overall sense.

The findings of the present study indicated that self-compassion explained 15% of positive relations with others, but when personality traits were added, the predictive power increased up to 34%. These results suggest that the dimension of personal characteristics has a higher explanatory power than that of self-compassion. When the predictors of positive relations with others as a subscale of psychological well-being are examined it is found that extroversion as a personality trait was the most important predictor in line with its high predictive power. Zıskıs (2010) found that the most significant predictor of the subscale of positive relations with others is extroversion. In extroverts such qualities as being sociable, talkative, being friendly and self-opening come to the fore. Extroverts are more successful in establishing close relations with others, which is one of the basic needs of humans as social beings and establishing secure relations. Therefore, they are expected to be in a better psychological condition.

The results of the present study revealed that self-compassion and personal characteristics account for 17% of the variance in autonomy, and the most significant predictors of autonomy are self-compassion, agreeableness and openness to experience. In the studies by Keyes et al. (2002) and Zıskıs (2010), it was found that the subscale of autonomy negatively correlated with neuroticism, and the one with the highest predictive power was neuroticism. Christopher (1999) notes that Ryff considers autonomy as equal to individualization and self-regulation of behaviour. Autonomous individuals regulate their behaviours through internal powers, and they assess themselves with their own personal standards. When we consider that self-compassion is a significant predictor of autonomy according to the results of the present study, it can be said that how individuals with self-compassion approach their own problems indicates that they regulate their own behaviours internally.

We see that agreeableness has emerged as a negative predictor in the study. Agreeable individuals are those who are polite, courteous, flexible, well-tempered, forgiving, soft-hearted, tolerant, humble, supportive, flexible, and they establish emotional affinity with others. The good-tempered individuals

might approach others' behaviours in a naive manner. We might assume that since they might be modest individuals rather than voicing their desires in interpersonal relations, and individuals who comply with joint decisions, they have not developed autonomy. Another personal characteristic that predicts autonomy is being open to new experiences. The individuals who are open to new experiences acquire real-life experiences and get acquainted with different cultures, and they are able to show self-resistance during these experiences. This indicates that they have developed autonomy.

The variables that predict environmental mastery as a subscale of psychological well-being were found to be self-compassion, responsibility, extroversion, neuroticism. The findings of the studies that focused on correlation between personal traits and psychological well-being (Keyes et al., 2002; Schmutte & Ryff, 1997; Ziskis, 2010) support well with those of the present study. Ryff (1989b) defines environmental mastery as the ability of the individual "to create or select an environment that is compatible with the individual's personal and psychological characteristics". Those individuals who dominate their environments are people who are able to use opportunities around themselves effectively and shape the environmental conditions in line with their own needs and values. Individuals with self-compassion are aware that problems in life are not only for themselves but also for others. Extroverts are able to understand others' feelings, since they develop empathic relations with them. People who lead an emotionally balanced life tend to experience positive emotions. Individuals who feel responsible are ready to cope with problems. From an integrated perspective that combines all of these properties, extroverts with a sense of self-compassion, who are interested in their environments and have a sense of responsibility and who seek positive feelings are expected to have high levels of environmental mastery.

The analysis that was carried out to determine the predictors of personal development subscale revealed that openness to experience and self-compassion were positive predictors, while neuroticism was a negative one. This finding of the study supports well with those in the literature (Keyes et al., 2002; Schmutte & Ryff, 1997; Ziskis, 2010). Ryff (1989a) defines personal development as "the ability to develop one's potentials, so that he/she could develop and grow individually". Individuals with higher levels of personal development desire to see themselves as a person who is developing

and growing, to be open to innovations, to be able to feel that they can use their potentials, to see that there is development in behaviours and in themselves, to get to know themselves and think that they are developing effectively. Being open to new experiences as one of the five factors involves individuals' tendencies to desire new experiences, being authentic and free when describing themselves, being curious and frank. In this respect, it is expected that individuals who are open to new experiences are content with their personal growth. Self-compassionate individuals might think that they have some deficiencies and they approach these deficiencies from the lens of kindness. This in turn might motivate them to compensate for these deficiencies. The continuity of the emotions in individuals who are at peace with themselves and who are open to development indicates that their motivation is permanent rather than temporary. Since the individuals who do not experience emotional instability are highly self-confident, they do not avoid making attempts. In addition, since they are self-compassionate, and waiting to develop, these individuals will be supported in terms of personal development.

Purpose in life means the properties of direction, aims and purposefulness that add meaning to their lives. Purpose of life involves individuals' feeling that the past and present life has a meaning; existing in life has a meaning, having prospective aims and objectives, and the most importantly there is a purpose in life. The individuals who fail to adopt a positive attitude towards the problems in life; in other words, those who lack self-compassion might continue their lives in depression by ruminating on such problems rather than solving them. Depression is a situation that triggers the perception of worthlessness. Furthermore, depression is a neurotic disorder; that is, it is a pathological situation that includes emotional imbalance. When these findings are considered, emotionally stable and self-compassionate individuals are expected to succeed in seeing their lives more positively, making their lives worthier and maintain their lives in line with the purposes of their lives. It is thought that this boosts their psychological well-being levels.

Ryff (1989a) defines self-acceptance as a person's having a positive attitude towards himself/herself. Self-acceptance implies a person's having a positive attitude towards himself/herself. Accepting different properties of the self with its positive and negative aspects and having positive attitudes towards one's past are the main components

of self-acceptance. Another dimension of self-compassion is that individuals treat each other with affection; that is, they exhibit more compassion than criticism towards themselves. Individuals with kindness have a positive and courteous attitude towards themselves rather than harshly criticizing themselves. The individual's having a positive attitude towards himself/herself is the common point in self-acceptance and self-perception. Introverts like being among people and appear in social environments. Therefore it can be thought that such individuals who go down well with the society might have a positive self-perception. In this regard, the individual who is aware of social acceptance will recognize the positive side of him/her and accept it. The individuals who possess emotional balance as a part of their characteristics are content with themselves (Friedman & Schustack, 1999), and they tend to experience positive feelings (McCrae & John, 1992). In this regard, when we consider the predictors in an integrated fashion, we can assume that self-compassion forms the basis of self-acceptance, while extroversion and emotional stability contribute to this. It can be noted that individuals' self-acceptance might contribute to their psychological well-being.

When the findings of the study are considered globally, it is seen that the impact of self-compassion and personality traits is highly significant in terms of psychological well-being. In this respect, we can carry out experimental studies to boost the self-compassion levels of individuals and contribute to the development of psychological well-being of new generations through such activities as contact meetings and parental schools to help families acquire positive personality traits.

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